

NARRATIVES OF ABSURDITY IN ALBERT CAMUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at a logical analysis of absurdity in the narratives of Albert Camus and its implications for human experiences. In order to achieve the desired aim, this paper employs analytic method of research to examine the concept of absurdity in the narratives of Camus and in correlation with human experiences. Absurdity refers to the human experience in the world as meaningless, hopeless, incongruent, irrational yet extremely ridiculous and unfairly inconsistent. Most unfortunately, the world itself is silent to this extremism and human reason is impelled to seek clarity about the meaning of the world, human experience and life. Absurdity according to Camus' narratives include; absurd man, absurd freedom, absurd world, etc. He typified the conditions of the absurd man in three narratives; *Myth of Sisyphus*, Don Juan who is a serial seducer and the Stranger. These narratives of the absurd in Albert Camus beg for dynamisms of solutions/options such as suicide, Leap of Faith or Philosophical Suicide and revolt. On appraisal, this paper shows that neither of these options offers good prospects out of absurdity as they are self-defective and destructive. They can be at best described as false solutions to the problem of absurdity. In conclusion, like Camus, this paper insists that we ought to constantly and relentlessly struggle to find meaning and purpose in a seemingly chaotic and illogical world. Rather than seek false solutions, there is need to take up ownership and responsibility of our lives.

Keywords: Camus, Absurd, Sisyphus, hopelessness, suicide, revolt, etc.

Concept of Absurdity

Curiosity on the questions of meaning is akin to human nature. This concern for meaning becomes most disappointing and more disturbing that the world itself is silent to the questions of meaning leading to absurdity. Thus Absurdity implies the frustration imposed by the irrational world and meaninglessness of existence. In spite of the meaninglessness of the world in itself, “the human reason is naturally impelled to seek clarity about the meaning of the world and of human life...but it can find no given meaning either in the world apart from man or in human life itself.”¹

It is in attempt to pursue this natural longing of the human mind in the quest for meaning that this paper takes up the notion of absurdity in Albert Camus. Beyond Camus are other philosophers who attempt to offer dynamisms of meaning to human life, world and existence such as Socrates in his intellectualism; Aristotle in his happiness as the end of human existence, etc.²

¹ Fredrick.Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Logical Positivism and Existentialism Vol.II*, (New York; Bloomsbury Publishers, 1972), 196

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Claredon Press 1998), Book 1, chap. 9.

The concept of absurdism is traced to the work of the 19th century Danish Philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. It was in his attempt to confront the crisis and meaninglessness of human existence in his existentialism that he developed the concept of absurdism. For Kierkegaard, the notion of absurdism is comparable to the concept of Paradox such that the absurd implies a state which cannot be rationally explained. Like paradox, the absurd depicts logical contradictions in human experiences and existence in the quest for meaning. Thus man's inability to mediate these contradictions leaves the individual in a state of absurdity. Little wonder Kierkegaard laments; "What is the absurd? It is, as may quite easily be seen, that I, a rational being, must act in a case where my reason, my power and reflection say: you cannot act, and yet I here is where I have to act."³

Human existence and the quest for meaning have become a great concern to existentialists so much so that existential nihilists claim that human existence is pointless, absurd,⁴ and life is full of sorrows, regrets, disappointment, frustration, despondency and pain. In the classical work of Shakespeare, *Macbeth*; existential nihilism is manifest in the speech of Macbeth while resigning to the inevitable defeat by the forces of Malcolm. Thus Macbeth says; "life is but a shadow, a good player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."⁵ This speech depicts the forlornness of human life, world and experience. It is a typical picture of absurdity. Absurdity calls to mind the concept of "vanity upon vanity" as the Christian Holy book describes life as vanity⁶. Here the Holy queries the meaning of human toils when all return to nothing.

³ Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong ed, "Soren Kierkegaard's Papers and Journals" (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 55

⁴ Donald Crosby, *The Spectre of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (New York: University Press, 1988), 30.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:2-8

NARRATIVES OF ABSURDITY IN ALBERT CAMUS

Born in 1913, Albert Camus –the French philosopher experienced harsh poverty and illness following the death of his father barely one year after his birth. Camus had two unsuccessful marriages, hence making him develop strong slight for the institution of marriage. His major philosophical development was centred on absurdity and some elements of existentialism even when he denied being an existentialist. His major books include; *The Stranger* (1941), *The Plague* (1948), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) where Camus described the concept of absurdity,⁷ *The Fall* (1957), and *The Exile and the Kingdom* (1958).

The question of absurdity is associated with the attempt to find meaning and purpose in life characterized with dynamisms of meaninglessness.⁸ It refers to “the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life, and human inability to find any in a purposeless, meaningless or chaotic and irrational universe.”⁹ Worthy of note is that philosophy understands the word absurd not in the ambience of logical impossibility but as humanly impossible.

In his rejection of European existentialist movement and in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*,¹⁰ Camus defined the human condition as absurd where absurdity refers to the meaninglessness of human condition, oddity of oneself and the world. It is a state we experience “the moment when we realize that our reason, our desires and demands for certainty, hope, and meaning have failed and gone unfulfilled.”¹¹ It is a situation occasioned by the disconnection between the longing for meaning and the cruel,

⁷ Parthiva Sinha, “Existentialism and Absurdity”, *International Research Journal of Education and Technology, Volume 04: Issue 12* (2022), 263.

⁸ Ansel Perera, “Absurdism Defined: its Meaning and Philosophy”, Owlcation, accessed December, 19, 2023, <http://www.owlcation.com/humanities/>

⁹ J. Dotterweich, “An Argument for the Absurd”, Kansas State University Undergraduate Research Conference (2019), 5.

¹⁰ R. Solomon, *From Rationalization to Existentialism: The Existentialists and their Nineteenth Century Backgrounds*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33.

¹¹ A. C. Hobson, “Confronting the Absurd: An Educational Reading of Camus’ *The Stranger*”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 45 (2013), 463.

irrational silence of the world.”¹² Thus absurdity accounts for the “the conflict between the human capacity to search for meaning and its inability to find it because he is in a frigid, unsound cosmos where it is not possible.”¹³ For Camus, this implies the condition of contradiction, doubt, tension, confrontation, ambiguity and unwavering uncertainty in human experience. The tension here referred is that between nihilism and the impulse to resist it as fundamental in human experience.¹⁴

Furthermore, Camus describes the absurd as “the confrontation between the human need or significance, meaning and clarity on one hand, and the unreasonable silence of the world on the other hand.”¹⁵ For Camus the feeling of the absurd implies two strands; man’s real desire for meaning and purpose on one hand and the meaninglessness of life and purposelessness of the world.¹⁶

In his description, the absurd man is considered as one who has lost meaning and sees the world as unreasonable and irrational. The absurd man feels the disconnection between the longing for meaning and the irrational silence of the world. Upon him is imposed the futility of his struggles. Camus describes the absurd man in the three Absurd Heroes; Sisyphus, Don Juan and The Stranger.

Camus depicts the absurd man in the *Myth of Sisyphus* as the principle character who is a wise and prudent mortal being.¹⁷ Here Sisyphus was accused of certain levities

¹² D. Berth, “Kierkegaard and Camus: Either/Or”, *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, 73 (2013), 137.

¹³ Sinha, Parthiva . “Existentialism and Absurdity”. *International Research Journal of Education and Technology*, Volume 04: Issue 12, 2022. 76-123.

¹⁴ S. Skrimshire, “A Political Theology of the Absurd? Albert Camus and Simone Weil On Social Transformation”, *Literature & Theology*, 20 (2006), 286..

¹⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1955), 53.

¹⁶ W. Veit, “Existential Nihilism: The Only Really Serious philosophical Problem”, *Journal of Camus Studies*, (2018), 218.

¹⁷ W. Brien, “The Meaning of Life: Early Continental and Analytical Perspectives”. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed December 20, 2023, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/mean-early>.

against the gods such as; stealing of the secrets of the gods, the scorn of his gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life.¹⁸ Consequent upon these accusations, his punishment was a form of condemnation “to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone could fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than a futile and hopeless labour.”¹⁹ So funny as it sounds that Sisyphus accepted this as his fate, hence reconstructed his mind to develop some level of passion which helped him in serving his penalty. According to Camus, “at each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lair of the gods, he is superior to his fate and he is stronger than his rock.”²⁰

Following this experience of Sisyphus, Camus opines that the absurd man is tempted but discovers his path of happiness. Thus the absurd man’s state of awareness which was to constitute torture at the same time crowns his victory. This motivation led to his claim that “there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”²¹

Secondly, Camus depicts the absurd man in another perspective of one who quite unlike Sisyphus does not journey towards self-transcendence rather gives up to meaninglessness of passion. This is the case with Don Juan, a serial seducer. As a serial seducer, Don Juan went around seducing women arbitrarily and neither gaining satisfaction nor control. With the same tactics, he manoeuvred everywoman and kept no serious relationship with any of them. According to Camus, this serial seducer made no effort towards self-transcendence rather lived for the passion of his instincts.

A third instance is the “Stranger”. In the narrative of *The Stranger*, Camus presents Meursault as another paradigm towards understanding the absurd. Meursault

¹⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 107.

¹⁹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 108.

²⁰ Brian, “The Meaning of Life.”

²¹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 187.

represents the extremely selfish desires and quest for avaricious satisfaction. Meursault neither cared about anything nor anybody, but himself, his own little pleasure and the necessities of the present. He did not even care for his own mother so much so that even upon the death of his mother, he was mean seeing no reason to cry at the mother's burial. He never visited the aged mother for three years even after receiving a Telegram about his mother sickness and later, death. The telegram from the home says: your mother passed away, funeral tomorrow.²² Meursault lived with great indifference to life and sees no meaning in life.

Absurdity in Camus and Logical Dice of Human Experience

For Camus, the world and human life are absurd and facing the absurd is like struggling against it. The absurd world is a universe divested of light and man feels an alien, a stranger.²³ The veracity of the absurd in the world is undeniable, "hence the intelligence, too, tells me in its way that this world is absurd."²⁴ Nevertheless, against all odds, Camus insists that "the meaning of life is the most urgent question"²⁵. Thus Camus says;

I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.²⁶

The search for meaning in a world that is silent and meaningless becomes a paradox.

In the attempt to provide meaning to a meaningless and silent world especially as regards miserable human experiences, Camus evaluates three considerations such as; Suicide, Leap of Faith (Philosophical Suicide) and Revolt.

²² Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 98.

²³ Camus, *The Stranger*,. 13.

²⁴ Camus, *The Stranger*, 26.

²⁵ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 12

²⁶ Camus, *The Stranger*, 12.

In the phase of this meaninglessness, irrationality, unreasonableness and purposelessness, many persons consider suicide as an option towards self-liberation from the forlornness of human experience and existence.²⁷ This raises lots of questions whether suicide can actually provide the desired meaning or hope to a meaningless or hopeless world.

Thus Camus questions the ability of suicide to be an answer to a world which appears to be mute both on the question of God's existence and for our search for meaning and purpose in the world. Far from being the solution to the absurd, suicide is self-defective and can at best be described as the highest form of absurdity. Thus suicide cannot be an adequate response to the absurdity of life. This is because, suicide deals with absurdity simply by suppressing one of the two poles-human being and the world- that together produce tension. For Camus, suicide is an expression of one's incapacity which is typically inconsistent with human pride, hence he claims that "there is nothing equal to the spectacle of human pride."²⁸

Suicide steers at one's face when the mind gets to its limits of providing answers/solutions to human experience. It is at this point, that man stands face to face with the irrational. Thus like calamities and sickness, the choice of suicide at this point is an admittance that the absurdities of life have overwhelmed us and made us to escape it through an invitation to instant death. Therefore, the choice of suicide is a sign of weakness and escapism. Little wonder, Haggins describes suicide not as an escape from overwhelming personality disaster or an act of fortitude rather it is an act of cowardice.²⁹ For Camus, one ought to live and struggle

²⁷ Crosby, *Spectre of the Absurd*, 3.

²⁸ Frederick. A. Olafson, "Camus Albert", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol 2, ed. P. Edward, 16.

²⁹ T. J. Higgins, *Man as man: The Science and Art of Ethics*, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1952), 102.

with the absurd rather than resigning to the falsehood of suicide, hence he says; “a determined soul will always manage.”³⁰

In the same vein, the second consideration towards providing meaning to a meaningless and silent world especially as regards human experience is the Leap of Faith or Philosophical Suicide. In Camus’ description, this is a theistic existential approach towards answering questions of human experience. It is a belief in a transcendent realm supposedly, of God whose existence is beyond the absurd and as such has meaning. Just as suicide leads to physical termination of one's life as a solution to the absurd human existence, leap of faith leads to termination of one’s reason or what he referred as philosophical suicide. This concept imposes every approach to life experience from the transcendental being.

Camus considers the existential leap of faith as propagated by Kierkegaard as the expulsion or annihilation of reason in human existence. Thus, in Kierkegaard, anything beyond the absurd requires an irrational and necessary religious escape, hence only God can provide meaning to the meaningless world. Camus therefore claims:

I am taking the liberty at this point of calling the existential attitude philosophical suicide. But this does not imply judgment. It is a convenient way of indicating the movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation. For the existential negation is their God. To be precise, that god is maintained only through the negation of human reason.³¹

Nevertheless, Camus does not question the existence of God but the logic leading to leap of faith”³² Minding the fact that the existential attitude (leap of faith) negates human reasoning capacity, Camus does not consider it as a solution to absurdity.

³⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 43.

³¹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*.

³² Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*

Camus adopts the third consideration towards providing meaning to the meaningless world as revolt. For Camus, revolt entails an acceptance of the absurd while one continues to live in spite of it. This is a confrontation of the absurd and Camus considers it as a coherent philosophical position. It is a philosophical position because it is a reasonable and constant challenge and confrontation between man and his own obscurity. This provides intellectual freedom because one accepts absurdity as unstoppable but reasonably confronts it. Human experience of absurdity is conquered by confrontations with the process of reasoned meaning-making struggles. Thus Camus says;

What man demands of himself is to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal.³³

This form of freedom refers to the lack of imprisonment by religious devotion or others moral codes. Here human freedom is encouraged because it offers opportunity to human reason to create meaning and purpose; to think and make wise decisions amidst the absurd. In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus claims that he draws from the absurd three consequences, which are “my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death, and I refuse suicide”.³⁴

Conclusion

In the “Myth of Sisyphus”, Albert Camus compared the punishment of Sisyphus to humanity’s futile search for meaning and truth in a meaningless, silent and indifferent world. Against the allurements of despair, Camus imagines Sisyphus defiantly meeting his fate as he walks down the hill to begin rolling the rock again even when it seems so much like a herculean or an impossible task. This ought to be typical of human

³³ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

³⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 62.

experience. Even though our daily struggles sometimes seem repetitive, despairing and absurd, we still need to attach significance and value to them by embracing them as our own in perseverance.

This narrative of Sisyphus-struggle suggests the symbolic power of the human mind to defeat any obstacle. Individuals, especially those at the risk of taking their own lives must strive to find hope and struggle to continue living on.

For Camus, Sisyphus' movement up and down the mountain is seen as a triumph, rather than as a conviction. Sisyphus is a demonstration of the fact that we can live "with the certainty of a crushing fate, without resignation."³⁵ In Sisyphus is a manifestation of strength and resilience in the face of absurdity. Even when the rock tumbles down, which is a real confirmation of his punishment, Sisyphus marches downwards to roll it up.

Though he goes up and down the mountain continuously, he believes this fate belongs to him. According to Maden, Sisyphus believes that this situation was his fate and needed to struggle with it.³⁶ It is a call to consciousness and responsibility rather than escapism in religious guise. Camus offers us a good model in the face of absurdity and meaninglessness, hence we ought not to accept defeat but follow the paradigm of Sisyphus. Thus we ought to struggle to find meaning and purpose in a seemingly chaotic and illogical world. There is need to take ownership and responsibility of our lives while avoiding false solutions in the face of absurdity.

³⁵ Albert Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays", trans. Justin O'Brien, (New York: Vintage, 1991), 45.

³⁶ J. Maden, "Camus on Coping with Life's Absurdity", Philosophy Break, Accessed February 24, 2024, <https://www.philosophybreak.com>

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